CONGRESSMAN SHERWOOD BOEHLERT (R-NY)
SPEECH TO PRESIDENTIAL TEACHER AWARDEES
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It's a pleasure – and indeed an honor – to be with you this morning. It's not every day that I get to speak to a profession's acknowledged "cream of the crop." And your "crop" is extra special because you're the folks who ensure that our nation will continue to lead and to prosper. To carry my metaphor just one step further – you're the crop that provides the seeds for our future.

It's also a pleasure to speak to you this morning because, quite frankly, Members of Congress don't spend enough time with teachers. We talk about teachers and teaching a lot – more than ever, perhaps. But we don't spend enough time truly listening to you, the people on the front lines of our educational system.

I'd like to hear ideas and questions from you this morning, as well, but first let me make some relatively brief remarks about the context of your visit to Washington.

The first thing to be said is that this is a critical time to be in Washington. The debate on the fiscal year 2006 budget is just beginning, and this is likely to be one of the most stringent budgets in recent memory. What to do about education funding will be a central feature of the debate.

But, actually, education has been an especially high profile issue here for at least the past four years.

The President put education on the "front burner" early in his term, and that had real impact. Both the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) reauthorization, and the "Mathematics and Science Partnerships Act," which I introduced, were signed into law.

Education funding has increased in each of the past three years. In fact, overall funding for the Department of Education has grown by $13.8 billion during that period, with the largest increases going to the Title I program for disadvantaged students, special education and teacher quality.

But all this attention may be a cause for concern as well as satisfaction. First, everyone is focusing on education because of a sense that our educational system – one of the great inventions of American democracy – a sense that our educational system is failing. Obviously, there are plenty of schools and teachers and students who are doing well, but the system as a whole seems deficient.

The evidence is all around us, but perhaps the best known damning evidence comes from the TIMSS exams, the Third International Mathematics and Science Survey. The TIMSS work in 1995, supplemented by a follow-up in 1999, found that U.S. fourth graders perform pretty well in math and science, but the performance drops to around the international average by the eighth grade and is near or at the bottom of the barrel in twelfth grade.

The 2003 TIMSS showed improvement in the absolute scores of fourth and eighth graders, but our relative rank didn't change much, with the rank of our fourth graders actually dropping.

One can raise legitimate questions about the accuracy and meaning of the TIMSS international comparisons, but the decline over the years of schooling alone is cause for alarm. We have simply got to do better.

But how? Well, here's the second way in which all this relatively new-found Washington attention may be cause for concern. Intervention from Washington can make things worse as well as better.

I don't say this from a conservative perspective. I'm a proud, card-carrying moderate. I think the federal government has an important role to play in K-12 education.

I think we need more federal money, not less, flowing into our local school districts. And my guess is that when all the debates on next year's budget come to a close, that will be, once again, where we end up.

But there are still many policy questions that need to be answered before we're sure that federal policies will lead to improvement in education.

For example, how can we ensure that technology actually improves education? The government's focus needs to shift from merely providing access to technology to figuring out how to use it in a manner that truly offers education, not distraction or empty entertainment or even mere information.

I'm not sure how we do that. I don't think that block granting education funds – which may be a good idea in many ways – will necessarily resolve this particular question.

There's no reason to believe that state or local authorities will be any more creative in their use of technology if left to their own devices (so to speak).

Or another question: how can we use exams in a way that promotes critical thinking, retention of knowledge and a love of learning?

The current mania for measurement is a necessary antidote to an era marked by a lack of accountability. But the wrong kinds of tests will not only mask evidence of a continuing decline; they could contribute to it.

We need to think more seriously about this issue. Too often, the discussion in Washington about testing degenerates into an ideological debate – an unusual one, though, where the left and the right unite – each for their own reasons – in opposing anything that smacks of a national testing requirement.

But it seems to me that the issue is not whether to have tests, but what kind of tests to have and how to use the results. And there's remarkably little discussion about those matters.

Another question: are we taking full advantage of the latest research on teaching and learning? The author Kurt Vonnegut once defined the "information revolution" as the remarkable fact that people could actually know what they're talking about, if they really want to. That "revolution" he said should supersede centuries of "mere guessing." But we seem often to still be in the "mere guessing" stage when we talk about curriculum and teaching methods.

And a final question: what can we be doing to help attract more top students into teaching science and math? It seems to me that this is the most critical question of all. No curriculum, no technology, no test will improve education unless we have the best qualified, best trained people teaching our students.

We need to ensure that we have future generations of Presidential Teacher Awardees.

I don't think that we've thought enough about this question, although things are looking up.

Years ago, I began proposing to give federal scholarships to top math and science majors who agree to teach for a set number of years in return for the tuition assistance. Senator Rockefeller and I got such a program enacted a decade or so ago, but it was never funded. Until the President signed the "Math and Science Partnerships Act" at the end of 2002.

For the current fiscal year, NSF will spend about $8 million on the scholarship program. That's just a start – the program would cost $20 million a year when fully funded – but finally everyone has rallied around the idea.

Obviously, a scholarship program will be able to reach only a small number of students, and not every top math and science undergraduate would make a successful teacher.

But the federal government needs to start sending a stronger signal that teaching is an honorable – indeed, a critical – career.

Just earlier this week, I introduced, along with my colleagues Frank Wolf and Vern Ehlers, and with Senator Warner a bill to create another incentive for math and science students to become teachers. This bill would provide student loan forgiveness for math and science majors who work at least five years in virtually any career related to math and science, including teaching. The bill is based on an idea that former Speaker Newt Gingrich floated in his recent book.

I don't mean any of these issues I've raised to be rhetorical questions. They are tough questions for which we don't seem to have ready answers. My goal is simply to ensure that we don't sweep these questions under the rug.

In the Science Committee, we continue to explore these questions as we continue to work to improve the education programs of the National Science Foundation (NSF).

Our Committee oversees NSF, but does not have any control over the Department of Education – two agencies that should be coordinating their efforts much more closely, by the way.

That's also improving – a bit. NSF and the Education Department are working together on the Math and Science Partnerships that are designed to bring the expertise and resources of universities and businesses to bear on the problems faced by K-12 teachers like you. NSF and the Department each have their own particular attributes and assets, but they must coordinate their work to get the most "bang for the buck."

In any event the Partnership program at NSF, which was proposed by the President, is a promising idea. That program is receiving $79 million this year, and would receive $200 million if fully funded. I believe our universities – and not just in their education departments – ought to be doing much more to help K-12 teachers.

Last year, Administration proposed what was frankly a crazy idea – shutting down the NSF program and merging it with a different partnership program at the Department of Education. Congress blocked that move, but we were not able to get enough money to NSF to allow them to make additional grant awards this year.

What's at stake is not a turf battle between two agencies – it's the nature of a successful program. At NSF, the program focuses on bringing higher education together with school districts, and the program funds only those applications that pass a rigorous peer review. The NSF program funds innovative efforts involving a variety of subjects at different levels of schooling. The Department of Education program is distributed by

formula, is geared to disseminating approaches that already exist, and is focused on middle-school mathematics. Real benefits would be lost by moving the program.

The budget proposal for the next fiscal year would once again not provide enough funds for NSF to make new Partnership awards, and the budget also proposes to cut other NSF K-12 education programs. We will be doing everything we can to fight those cuts in a tough budget.

But all this debate simply underscores the point I started with – you're in Washington at precisely the right time. We need your guidance and your experience to figure out how to turn our good intentions toward education into good results.

In science and math education, those results need to include an educated and scientifically literate populace; a large, diverse and well trained workforce; and an intellectually curious culture.

That's a tall order. And it's one we're going to have to address together. For as the writer H.G. Wells said long ago, "Civilization becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe."

I look forward to hearing your ideas. Thank you.